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# **An International Degree, Social Ties and Return When International Graduates Make a Career Back Home in Kyrgyzstan**

SUSAN THIEME\*

## **Abstract**

Student mobility is increasing worldwide, and Kyrgyzstan is no exception. This study looks at students who returned after their degree and highlights the increasing transnational, networked character of professionals, emphasizing not only the physical presence of migrants, but also the value of knowledge transfer. Transnationalism can be maintained without moving physically, for example through interaction with international donor agencies in the country or through an in-depth application of the knowledge gained abroad. However, it is not just the education or cultural capital abroad that allows these students to make a successful return and position themselves in the labour market, but also their network or “place-based social capital”. The study also highlights the structural settings and socio-economic and political environments that influence the way skills and knowledge can be applied.

## **Keywords**

Student migration, cultural and social capital, knowledge, employment, Kyrgyzstan

## **Introduction**

The circulation of highly skilled professionals is central to discussions about the new “mobilities paradigm” (e.g. Sheller / Urry 2006) and has been attracting growing attention (e.g. Jöns 2009; Hall 2011). Academic as well as policy discourses about brain circulation and brain drain highlight in-

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\* SUSAN THIEME, Human Geography Unit, Department of Geography, University of Zurich; susan.thieme@geo.uzh.ch. The research for the present study was conducted within the framework of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South, co-funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the participating institutions. I am grateful for the valuable comments of three anonymous reviewers as well as the editors of this volume Henryk Alff, Andreas Benz and Matthias Schmidt.

creasing transnational movement and networking among professionals, emphasizing not only the physical presence of migrants, but also the value of knowledge transfer (Ackers 2005; Jöns 2009). Allan M. Williams (2007: 42) sees migrants as having the potential to “bridge different knowledge communities”, transferring knowledge about products and processes and building networks. This paper intends to shed some light on this bridge-building in practice. I will argue that it is not just people’s education or cultural capital abroad, but also their networks or “place-based social capital” (Waters 2009: 113) that affect their capacity to successfully return and position themselves in the labour market. This case study looks at Kyrgyz international graduates who (re-)enter the labour market once they return home.

International students have long been overlooked within the category of “highly skilled migrants” (Favell et al. 2006); only in recent years have they attracted greater attention (e.g. Brooks / Waters 2009; Findlay et al. 2012; King 2012). The topic has, with some exceptions (Samanchina 2012), been even more neglected in a region such as Central Asia, where labour migration to secure livelihoods remains the major factor in mobility (e.g. Thieme 2008, 2012; Reeves 2011).

The number of Kyrgyz nationals studying at foreign universities has increased in recent years. In 2012 more than 220,000 students were enrolled at higher education institutions in Kyrgyzstan (National Statistical Committee 2014). The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD 2012) estimates that 1.5% of all students in Kyrgyzstan are currently studying abroad. Scholarship programmes and policymakers see studying and living abroad as a way to enhance explicit skills such as subject-specific knowledge as well as tacit knowledge such as language, communication and management abilities. Nevertheless, about half of Kyrgyz students who have studied abroad opt to stay in (or return to) the countries where they were educated, either to study further or to work. Others find better employment opportunities in third countries.

Of the other 50% of young adults who have studied abroad, some graduates are indeed successful in finding employment or establishing private businesses upon their return to Kyrgyzstan. They are confident about their future professional life in their home country and are motivated to overcome the various hurdles they may face. This group of Kyrgyz students who are studying or have studied abroad recently with the clear intention of returning after their studies or who have already returned are the subject of

this article.<sup>1</sup> The questions addressed in the article are: Why do people study abroad and why do they return? How can they make use of the cultural capital gained abroad? What role does social capital play in their efforts to establish themselves professionally?

## **Student mobility in Kyrgyzstan**

It is difficult to find any official figures for labour mobility. Only selective numbers are available because they vary considerably, depending on the source. The top destinations for the 1.5% of all Kyrgyz students who go abroad for their education (DAAD 2012) are Russia, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Germany and the USA (Thieme et al. 2013). They go abroad through four main channels: 1) programmes offered under intergovernmental agreements; 2) funding by the government of Kyrgyzstan; 3) self-funding and foreign scholarships, including institutions focusing only on academic exchanges, such as the German Academic Exchange Programme (DAAD), and international non-profit organisations, such as the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX); and 4) international donor agencies or foundations such as the George Soros Open Society Foundations (OSF). There are no national statistics about student return migration, and not all organisations keep detailed records of returnees. According to programme managers, about 50% of scholars who go abroad do not return to their home country after completing their master's degree, choosing instead to either remain in the destination country where they received their diplomas or migrate further. The other 50% of students return (see also Salzmann 2008; Thieme et al. 2013).

High labour mobility is fairly typical of Kyrgyzstan. Today, depending on the source, between 10 and 20% of the population work in the "near-abroad" countries of Russia and Kazakhstan. Remittances account for 30% of GDP (World Bank 2013), one of the highest levels in the world. Many migrants often work illegally in Russia without any official registration and in employment that fails to match the level of skills and professional experience they acquired in Kyrgyzstan. Thus, they work in sectors such as the service industry, construction and retail trade (Thieme 2012), which challenges the often polarised discourse about "elite highly skilled" and "unskilled" workers (Favell et al. 2006: 7). At the same time, top graduates

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<sup>1</sup> Student mobility is used in the sense of degree mobility, i.e. where the student stays abroad for an entire master's degree or PhD programme.



from Kyrgyzstan can enjoy better career prospects and higher wages in booming sectors in Kazakhstan than in their home country.

More recently, initiatives were started in 2011 and 2012 to redirect highly skilled migrants to their home country and its economy. These forums, entitled “*Mekendeshter*” (Compatriots), were organised through the initiative of the former president Roza Otunbayeva, in collaboration with the government of Kyrgyzstan and Zamandash (Contemporary), an association of Kyrgyz migrants. Furthermore, a small parliamentary working group took the initiative to establish a new government-funded student mobility scholarship programme, which imposes on students the obligation to return and work for some years in Kyrgyzstan (Interviews 2011).

### **Return migration, capital and knowledge: conceptual background**

The migration-development nexus assumes that in particular highly skilled migrants are potential sources of “social remittances” for their country, either by returning or by maintaining linkages and fostering exchanges between the countries (e.g. Levitt 1998). Favell et al. (2006: 2) are very critical of generalisations about the highly skilled as the new “global elites” or “transnational capitalist class” and call for more in-depth research on “socially differentiated realities”. Although the migration of highly skilled individuals is clearly closely linked to choice, professional careers and educational opportunities (Favell et al. 2006: 4), they might still experience limited job opportunities, networks and support at home.

To conceptualise the role of students as knowledge brokers I combine Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of capital with conceptual debates about knowledge (Wolfeil 2012). Bourdieu distinguishes between economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital. Economic capital refers to the ownership of monetary profit, which can be cashed in. Social capital consists of a network of lasting social relations or an individual circle of acquaintances. Cultural capital is the product of intellectual ability or educational qualification and can be objectified (cultural goods such as books), institutionalised (e.g. educational qualifications) or incorporated (e.g. knowledge and experience). Symbolic capital is the recognition and legitimisation of other forms of capital that can lend a person prestige and reputation (Bourdieu 1986; Grenfell / James 1998). All forms of capital can be transformed into one another, but they attain value and power only if applied in a social field where they are valued (Grenfell / James 1998; Thieme 2006). Combining the concept of capital with debates about knowledge, Nina Wolfeil (2012: 122–123) suggests that implicit knowledge, for example, would be equivalent to

incorporated cultural capital. Very little research has been done on the intersections of knowledge production and migration studies. Knowledge has often been analysed in management literature, but so far there has been little cross-pollination with mobility studies (Wolfeil 2012); exceptions include the contributions of Allan W. Williams and Vladimir Baláz on return migration and knowledge transfer (e.g. Baláz / Williams 2004; Williams 2007, 2008).

Knowledge is a broad concept and includes various different typologies (e.g. Williams 2007). Students are generally expected to gain different types of knowledge, such as encoded knowledge (books and papers), embedded knowledge (organisational practices), encultured knowledge (shared systems of meanings) or embrained knowledge (conceptual and cognitive) (see Blackler 2002; Raghuram 2013: 139). In a broader sense one can differentiate between more easily accessible explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge, which is gained through interpersonal knowledge, exchanges and learning that cannot be expressed easily in explicit forms (Polanyi 1966). In practice, these different types of knowledge are fluid and interrelated. Furthermore, the way in which they are gained, shaped and used, as well as which social boundaries people cross, depends on personal factors as well as the outside social environment (Williams 2007: 33–34).

Being locally embedded in their place of origin as well as at their destination, international migrants can be important in terms of knowledge creation and its application, building networks between places and between non-migrants and migrants. Citing John Allen, Allan M. Williams (2006: 7) writes: “The translation of ideas and practices, as opposed to their transmission, are likely to involve people moving to and through ‘local’ contexts, to which they bring their own blend of tacit and codified knowledge, ways of doing and ways of ‘judging’ things.” Williams thereby highlights the social embeddedness and networking nature of knowledge. In the same manner, the following research will stress the close connection between cultural and social capital, supporting studies that emphasise that the value of cultural capital is often tied to social capital. Education, knowledge and experiences are not cultural capital *per se* – but it is relational in historical, societal and biographical changes and expressed as a relation between expectations and options in the labour market and the kind of cultural capital one has acquired. Only this interplay allows knowledge and ability to be productive and appreciated in the labour market (Nohl et al. 2010; Waters 2009).



## Methodology

The paper presents results based on a broader study of student mobility, these students' passage from education to work, and how knowledge gained abroad can be applied in their professional lives. The students selected completed their master's level education and/or PhD degree abroad. Migrants whose primary intention was to move in search of work and participants in other educational programmes such as high school or language courses were excluded. The empirical work in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's capital, was carried out by the author during a three-month field research period between April and July 2011 and by project assistant Zarina Bruce, who used the same interview guidelines, in a two-week follow-up in 2012. The author carried out additional interviews in Switzerland in 2011 and 2012 and via Skype.

The total of 65 interviews focused on three groups of informants: 1) graduates who had already returned, three interviews with students still studying and intending to return and six interviews with people in Switzerland who intended to stay abroad for the time being; 2) representatives of scholarship programmes and institutions providing services in the field of education, such as embassies and international relations departments at universities; and 3) employers and representatives of labour market or employment-related institutions in order to gain an overview of the general employment situation and the employability of the returnees interviewed (e.g. chambers of commerce).

In addition, the author attended a two-day alumni meeting in Naryn, Kyrgyzstan, run by one scholarship programme, as well as round table discussions in parliament about an earlier government scholarship programme "Kadr 21". The majority of interviews were conducted in English or German, and the five interviews in Kyrgyz were translated by an interpreter into English or German. At the request of all of the respondents, the names of universities, cities and respondents are confidential; the last are replaced by pseudonyms.

Three subgroups evolved from the group of returnees to Kyrgyzstan. The first included those who had returned as intended and had in most cases enjoyed very positive experiences; their career in Kyrgyzstan had benefited greatly from their stay abroad. The second group of returnees had very mixed or negative experiences and felt their international degree had not paid off. They were planning to go abroad again in search of other options. The third and smallest group of people felt they were stagnating or were still searching for satisfactory employment, either because they had not yet managed to find work or, particularly among women, were under great pressure to start a family and therefore had to postpone their professional

ambitions. Unlike the first group, they did not – at least at the time of the interviews – plan to migrate again.

As the paper focuses on how international graduates can apply the knowledge they gained abroad, the article focuses on the first group, i.e. returnees who feel professionally comfortable and can use their knowledge.

## **Reasons for studying abroad**

Migrating great distances for educational reasons is not a new phenomenon. In the Soviet era, a degree from a prestigious university such as Moscow or Leningrad (now St Petersburg) was highly valued, and even today is still associated with better career prospects. However, it was not until after 1991 that opportunities arose to migrate to Western Europe, North America or Asian countries such as Japan. People migrate for a combination of personal, meso- or macro-level reasons. The main attractions of pursuing a degree abroad are the higher quality of education, better job opportunities and the ability to study certain disciplines not taught in Kyrgyzstan, particularly at master's level. In Kyrgyzstan the quality and fees of colleges and universities, as well as the forms of corruption, vary enormously, and a Kyrgyz degree is no longer a guarantee of secure employment (see also Amsler 2009). Therefore, my respondents felt that going abroad was the only way of obtaining an internationally recognised degree in order to gain either better job opportunities or a higher salary in their home country. The main destinations are Russia, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Germany and the USA (Thieme et al. 2013). Furthermore, many planned to work abroad again in a qualified position at some stage in the future. This intention to go abroad has been confirmed by other studies, which show that mobility for education often leads to mobility for employment (Brooks / Waters 2011).

Apart from educational interests, respondents perceived a stay abroad as a chance to escape from conservative conceptions of early marriage and family-related constraints, or to search for a better place to live. Another important motivation was the opportunity to visit other places (also Raghuram 2013: 143), as many Kyrgyz people cannot afford to take holidays far from home. Overall, these people have benefited from a wider range of choices and incentives that were not available to previous generations and which are even now only available to a small number of students.

It is difficult to make any generalisations about the socio-economic background of the students, though. Those who finance their studies themselves come from more prosperous families, but many also combine study and work to fund a substantial part of their studies abroad. The respondents'



initial universities varied greatly. What all of the respondents have in common, however, is their parents' concern that their children have access to the best possible education, even if the parents themselves lacked higher education (see also Amsler 2009). This was particularly true of students on scholarships. In addition, nearly all of them had either friends or a tutor at university who encouraged and supported them while they were abroad or going through the application procedures.

### **Reasons for returning**

The range of reasons for returning demonstrates the multidimensional structure of a "status passage" (Nohl et al. 2010). People do not just experience a passage from education to work; family situations might change or people might return, move farther afield, or decide to stay where they are. The return of graduates is closely linked to potential applications for their knowledge in the labour market. Returnees confirmed that most of their colleagues who did not return had trouble continuing their education and could not immediately find a skilled job that matched their expectations; consequently, they took on menial jobs. Working in a low-skilled service-sector job abroad was not an option for those who returned. Homesickness, the lack of family and friends and the alien cultural environment, such as language, are additional reasons for migrants' wishing to return.

In many cases, women and men move into a further life stage while studying. One very prominent reason for returning is the intention, and sometimes the pressure, to marry. Children can either be an incentive to return, due to a wish for them to be close to the extended family and friends, or a strong reason not to return to Kyrgyzstan due to the children's access to better education abroad (Interviews by Thieme 2011 & 2012). In addition, several scholarship programmes require students to return to Kyrgyzstan. Students' reactions to this obligation to return varied: some felt strongly committed to their home country and morally obliged to return, others felt forced to return unless they could find a way of circumventing this rule and staying in the country where they had studied.

That said, returnees' longing for home is strongly linked to their intention to apply the knowledge they gained abroad and become professionally active.

## **Cultural capital, knowledge application and social networks**

It is characteristic of the returnee group described in this paper that they had studied abroad with the intention of returning — and did so. Before going abroad, they not only considered the fact that they would need to return, but also thought critically about the extent to which their expectations would be met and how they could use their knowledge. They also emphasised, either explicitly or implicitly, the relevance of social networks for finding work. Four examples are given here of people working in different sectors: teaching, politics and the private sector (company ownership and consultancy). All of them returned with an international master's degree and had worked and studied in Kyrgyzstan before they went abroad for their studies.

A first important finding is the careful selection of a specific study programme. This is evident in the case of Ainagul, who was on the point of returning at the time of the interview. She holds two bachelor's degrees from Kyrgyzstan (in languages and economics). Before studying abroad she worked fulltime in a bank in the city of Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan and taught blind children on a voluntary basis at weekends. Her passion for this work motivated her to start a long-distance online course with a US university, while she also explored possibilities to study abroad. Having trained as a teacher in the US, she planned in the future to open an educational centre for blind people, an underserved sector in pedagogy in Kyrgyzstan. She carefully selected her study programme in the US in order to be able to apply her newly gained knowledge upon her return. She is the only member of her family to have studied abroad. Although her family was concerned that job opportunities might be better in the USA, she was determined to return to Kyrgyzstan:

I found out that there are no textbooks in English in Braille for blind people. There was no method of teaching, and I wanted to work towards that [...] I felt that this is the gap and I need to know more. [...]

I knew that blind people can be independent, but I did not know how to apply it. Now I have this experience [...] I am ready to go and train the blind people. I know that there will be a change and that it will come. I can be a bridge and offer the training centre. (Ainagul, Skype interview, 26 June 2011, shortly before returning to Kyrgyzstan)

Ainagul clearly valued all the different types of knowledge mentioned in this paper: alongside subject-specific encoded knowledge, embedded and encultured knowledge seem to be of particular relevance to her. In the US she experienced the benefits of a good training system for blind people.

Similarly, Aibek had managed to gain a scholarship for a master's programme in Japan after completing a degree in Oriental Studies from a

Kyrgyz university. Aibek is married and has children now, but did not have children at the time of his studies in Japan. His intention was to improve his already existing IT business, which he started up with colleagues during his studies in Kyrgyzstan:

I developed this company to work with the Japanese and do business with them [...] It wasn't my dream to go abroad and live and work there; no, I wanted to live, work and do my business here in Kyrgyzstan. [...] I wanted to learn the Japanese language and to learn how business is done there, to familiarise myself with Japanese management and to work with them, to make business with them. (Aibek, Kyrgyzstan, 5 May 2011)

Aside from more subject-specific IT knowledge, he was able to use in particular the language, business management and communication style in his business.

As a second finding, social networks and social capital seemed to play a key role in their professional success and future. In Aibek's case, the transnational connections with Japan were key to his success. Having started off with three people, the company now employs 25 staff, develops software applications and does most of its business with Japan.

Ainagul, the teacher, who was working in a very small field, realised that the implementation of her idea of an integrated school for blind children would be more promising if she could foster her professional networks even before returning. She therefore also invited a former colleague from her school to the training centre for the blind in the US with which her department was affiliated:

So the director pays all the fees [...] they provide housing and they give free training. (Skype interview, 26 June 2011)

Her intention of providing a colleague with first-hand experience in the US, thereby assuring a better start upon her return to Kyrgyzstan, is typical of the "intended returnees" group. Ainagul established networks between previously unconnected people and became engaged simultaneously in several countries (Williams 2006: 594), thus benefiting from her own local embeddedness in the home country as well as the recent country of destination. Furthermore, Aibek's and Ainagul's frequent reference to the importance of information and information and communication technology (ICT) (and Ainagul's professionalism in our interview via Skype) exemplifies the role of the internet as an "intermediary social space" (Nedelcu 2012: 1350). These examples of a connected lifestyle and the capacity to implement new ideas reveal the dialogic dimension where local and global trends, the realities of the home and host countries, and migrants and non-migrants, become strongly interlinked and blurred (Nedelcu 2012).



Another returnee is Jamil, a member of parliament. He describes himself as having been politically active since his youth. Opposed to President Bakiev (2005–2010), he decided to leave the country and study in the US. He took his whole family along, and his two children have stayed in the US for their higher education. He gained a degree in economics in US and lobbied for graduates to return. Following Johanna L. Waters (2009: 116), who stresses the often hidden role of social capital and embedded and localised social relations, Jamil also pointed out more subtle dimensions of networks that prevent people from returning and making use of their cultural capital:

You know why I returned? Because I was sure that I'd find myself in my country [...] Before America I'd already had good experience and I was a government person and therefore I was absolutely sure that I'd realise myself in my country. Most people who receive an education abroad are not sure that they'll find themselves here because of corruption, because of tribes. Therefore they stay in America or Europe, because they are not sure. And they are right in some way. Our government is not yet ready to accept educated people from there and it is afraid of them. (Jamil, Kyrgyzstan, 22 June 2011)

He admits that many people find it difficult to return with as much confidence as he did. In his view, the key to returning and staying is having some experience of work and some networks before leaving, and being confident about one's professional future. This was also confirmed by interviews with people who planned to migrate again or had failed to find appropriate work. In their opinion, many employment opportunities in Kyrgyzstan require social networks and relatives or friends who can provide access to attractive jobs.

Besides the clear understanding of why and what to study abroad and the investment in professional networks, a third typical characteristic of the group of returnees is their sense that their knowledge is distinct from others', and they try to convey their ideas and experiences to their colleagues or their target groups.

Ainagul, the teacher, realised that the implementation of her idea of an integrated school for blind children would depend on external funding and support:

In fundraising they need to know English, they need to know how to present themselves. [...] I will work and find different organisations, which might give support, or at least they support Central Asia. [...] I really feel like if I can talk to the people I can get what I want; it is easy for me to talk to other people. (Skype interview, 26 June 2011, shortly before returning to Kyrgyzstan)

She felt that her language ability and presentation skills would enable her to build a bridge and interpret the needs of blind people in Bishkek to an international, financially supportive audience and beyond.

Jamil, the parliamentarian, perceived it as his "gain" (interview Jamil, 2011) to be able to communicate easily with NGOs and international donor agencies, but the implementation of new ideas did not always seem easy among his fellow MPs. He had led an initiative on a new legal framework for the passport system in Kyrgyzstan:

When I talk about new ideas which I get from America or Europe, they don't understand. They say that it is impossible, it is another culture, and it is another environment. We have a conflict of ideas, cultures, but anyway I have my own culture and I know European and American culture and we can join them and we can change. To be honest, it is a little bit difficult but I know the good ideas, modern ideas, they will win anyway. (Jamil, Kyrgyzstan, 22 June 2011)

Another graduate returnee is Emil. He gained a Master's in Business and Commerce in Switzerland. He is the eldest son, grew up in a family deeply involved in the textile business, in which he worked before going abroad. Emil's case also backs up findings that the decision to migrate is often a family project (Waters 2006). His parents had to convince him to go abroad. A combination of strong family ties, his interest in the family business and a feeling while abroad that he would never really feel entirely integrated as foreigner made him confident about returning. He was not married at the time of the study. He was working as a fashion designer as well as a consultant for the textile industry. He emphasised how he felt able to build bridges between the knowledge of not only different countries, but also between stakeholders such as international donors and local company owners. The blend of knowledge from Kyrgyzstan and his studies abroad made him feel distinct from international consultants. He believes this blending allows him to fulfil his job:

They [international consultants] have never been to Kyrgyzstan. They don't know anything about the Kyrgyz garment industry. They got all their information from reports, from books. They can judge by their own Western vision. And this is not a Western country at all. This is a combination of Western and Eastern countries [...] It is pretty tough to explain to companies [...] you should invest also into your business, not only fabrics or equipment [...] especially your employees should be qualified, your marketing should be more clarified. [...] Slice by slice I provide my experience. (Emil, Kyrgyzstan, 5 May 2011)

The observation that all respondents felt distinct, yet at the same time rooted in Kyrgyzstan, brings to mind Turner's "cosmopolitan virtue" (Turner in

Brooks / Waters 2011: 14), combining respect and interest for other cultures with patriotic feelings and strong emotional commitment to a specific place.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This paper seeks to make a contribution to debates about return migration and the role of social and cultural capital in a successful transition to the labour market as seen from the perspective of a more privileged group, i.e. international graduates. The work confirms other authors' findings in two ways. Firstly, studying abroad opens the door to institutionalised cultural capital in the form of a "western degree". Secondly, the research confirms the crucial role of social capital in valuing international education (Hall 2011; Waters 2009; Wolfeil 2012). Furthermore, the findings emphasise the at least partially place-based nature of social capital used in a transnational manner (Waters 2009; Wolfeil 2012). The respondents seemed not only well aware of where and why they wanted to go abroad, but were also confident about their decision to return. It therefore became a crucial part of their ability to return that they were able to build and maintain transnational networks during their stay in another country through social media, Skype, short-term visits and musings about a future life in Kyrgyzstan (King / Christou 2011: 452).

The paper shows the need to situate the mobility of knowledge not only geographically, but also in relation to more individual contexts such as different life courses and structural contexts such as labour market conditions and employability.

In addition, after their return to Kyrgyzstan, graduates might maintain active transnational linkages by physically crossing international borders, for example when travelling on business. Moreover, the research also shows how transnationalism can be retained without actually moving through the option of applying knowledge and skills transnationally (also Beck 2008), for example through interactions with international donor agencies in one's home country, or through in-depth application of the knowledge acquired abroad. The research raises questions about how graduates and future professionals can sustain their reproduction of educational privilege and on return convert their cultural capital in the labour market to their satisfaction.

This interconnectivity and return of migrants challenge the brain-drain hypothesis. There is a lot of evidence of how transnational networks are maintained and how cultural and social capital can later enrich migrants' home countries. The group of respondents is made up of returnees who actively use the knowledge they gained abroad and feel professionally



fulfilled. Their intention to contribute to their home country and to build bridges between different cultures strongly influences their decision both to go abroad and to return; this confirms the relevance of the personal characteristics, self-perception and affiliations of skilled migrants on their return (Siddiqui / Tejada 2014). Migration abroad has had an enormous influence on their social and working lives, and studying and living abroad has enhanced their knowledge and skills. They have gained self-confidence and a clearer understanding of their future careers. While confirming the high relevance of individual profiles and the social capital of migrants for a successful return, the literature also emphasises the structural settings and the socio-economic and political environment which influence the way skills and knowledge can be applied (e.g. Gribble 2008). In Kyrgyzstan, reference is often made to Kazakhstan's presidential scholarship programme (Bolashak), which imposes strict conditions on students to ensure that they return (Thieme et al. 2013). Other countries, for example China, have radically changed their attitude towards migrants. Instead of seeing them as unpatriotic, China has begun to appreciate them as a valuable resource and is investing exceptionally high sums in higher education to retain students in China (Gribble 2008). Kyrgyzstan is only beginning to discuss potential government involvement in the question of students' eventual return. Nevertheless, targeted return-migration policies are highly controversial, and despite the partial success of return policies in countries such as India, China and South Africa (e.g. Siddiqui / Tejada 2014), research confirms that family and community ties or the transferability of social benefits are often stronger predictors of return than government programmes. However, the latter can, of course, nourish a pre-existing desire to sustain vital ties with the home country.

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